

SIBLING INCEST OFFENDERS AS A SUBSET OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL OFFENDERS

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on sibling incest offenders. Previous studies have shown that harm caused by sibling sexual abuse parallels that inflicted by fathers and step-fathers and that sibling incest offenders typically perpetrate greater numbers of offence incidents, over a longer period of time than other adolescent sexual offenders. However, despite such research highlighting the serious nature of sibling sexual abuse, sexual assault perpetrated by siblings is often viewed as somehow less serious than other forms of child sexual abuse.

This study will compare a sample of Queensland sibling incest offenders with other adolescent sexual offenders on a number of dimensions including offence dynamics, family background and psychological profile. Discussion will focus on the implications of these research findings, including challenges for the professional systems in responding to sibling sexual abuse.

Introduction

Many challenges have existed for professionals in understanding and responding to adolescent sibling incest offenders. A very small but growing body of research literature informs work in this field, but discrepancies appear to exist between some of these research findings and popular myths about such behaviour. Given the reportedly high prevalence rates of sibling incest, it is important to build on this small body of research, in an attempt to shed light on these challenging issues and inform future professional practice.

Prevalence studies consistently appear to suggest high rates of sibling incest and that abuse by a sibling may in fact be more prevalent than other forms of child sexual abuse. In Goldman and Goldman's (1988) Australian prevalence study 57% of people who had experienced intrafamilial sexual abuse reported that the sexual contact occurred with a brother or sister. An earlier USA study of college students (Finkelhor, 1979) found that 94% of reported nuclear family incest involved siblings. A more recent study undertaken in the United Kingdom reported similar findings, with sibling sexual abuse reported to be twice as common as intrafamilial sexual abuse perpetrated by a father or step-father (Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000).

Despite apparently high prevalence rates, the empirical knowledge-base on sibling incest is very limited. In fact, Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro (1998) estimate that only 11% of the broader child abuse research literature over the past 30 years has focused specifically on abusive behaviours between siblings, with even less focused specifically on sexual behaviours between siblings. The evidence-base for professional practice in this field is therefore weak.

Some of the research in this area has focused on the impacts of sibling incest on victims, and generally suggests that sibling incest is experienced as harmful by some victims, with reported symptoms similar to those experienced by victims of parent-child sexual abuse (e.g. Cyr, Wright, McDuff, & Perron, 2002; Laviola, 1992; Wiehe, 1990). This research also suggests a pattern of parental denial and minimisation of sibling incest, which has the potential to exacerbate such negative impacts (Adler & Schutz, 1995; Owen, 1998).

Other studies have focused on comparing adolescents who sexually abuse siblings with other adolescents who commit sexual offences. For example, O'Brien (1991) compared offending patterns of sibling offenders with other adolescent sexual offenders. Within this study, the sibling incest offenders were compared with three other groups of adolescent offenders including those who abused children outside of their family, those who offended against same-aged peers or adults, and a mixed group who offended across these victim groupings. The sibling incest offenders had a higher mean number of offences, a longer offending history, more intrusive sexual behaviour, more access to victims, younger victims and a higher number of other reported behavioural problems including conduct disorder.

Worling (1995) provided further insight into differences between adolescent sibling offenders and other offenders, revealing similarities in individual characteristics, but differences in relation to family environment factors. The findings of this study suggest that sibling incest offenders are more likely to witness marital discord, experience parental rejection, physical discipline and dissatisfaction with family relationships and have a history of sexual victimisation.

Trends in Australia suggest that sibling offenders are less likely to be charged and sentenced for their offences than non-sibling child offenders. Programs like the Children's Protection Society in Victoria, working predominantly with non-adjudicated youth, report that 43% of their adolescent clients abused a sibling (Flanagan & Hayman-White, 2000). This can be compared to reports of 28% for sibling offenders by the Male Adolescent Program for Positive Sexuality in Victoria (Male Adolescent Program for Positive Sexuality, 1998) and 18% for sibling offenders at the Griffith

Adolescent Forensic Assessment & Treatment Centre (GAFATC), Queensland, both of which only service adjudicated youth. In a study of adjudicated adolescent sex offenders in New South Wales, Nisbet & Seidler (2001) reported 25% of their sample as incest offenders, however it must be noted that their definition of incest offenders differed slightly from those used by the other programs. It is further noted that this trend is also reported internationally by O'Brien (1991).

Further research is certainly required to aid our understanding of the phenomenon of adolescent sibling incest offending, in order to inform evidence-based practice in this field. It is only with further research, that current professional practice can be reassessed and examined and future directions guided.

The current study constitutes a descriptive comparative analysis of adolescent sibling incest offenders against children and adolescent sexual offenders against nonsibling children. This represents preliminary data, which forms part of a larger research project into the phenomenon of sibling incest offending. This study is based on a Queensland population of young people referred to GAFATC, a collaborative initiative of Griffith University and the (Queensland) Department of Families (Nisbet, 2000). The program, which offers assessment and treatment services to adjudicated youth as well as consultation and training, has been operating since April 2001.

Method

Participants

A total of 72 young people have been referred to GAFATC by the Court Services division of the Queensland Department of Families since April 2001. Assessment and treatment services are provided across the spectrum of offending, from "hands off" offences, to the most serious rapes. Treatment is provided for clients in the community, as well as those in detention. In the majority of referrals (61%) the index offence victim is a child. Only one referral has so far been received for a female client.

Participants in the present study were 32 young males, 44% of the current referral base. All had either pleaded guilty to, or had been found guilty of, committing a "hands on" sexual offence against a child. For the purposes of the present study, a child victim was defined as a person under the age of 13 and at least three years younger than the perpetrator. This definition was not intended to imply a restricted conceptualisation of sibling offending as only involving perpetration towards much younger siblings, but was utilised solely for the purposes of this preliminary analysis.

Forty-one percent ($n = 13$) had offended against siblings, defined as either a brother or sister, a half-brother or half-sister, or a step-brother or step-sister. The remaining 19 participants offended against other nonsibling children.

Procedure

All data were collected routinely as part of the GAFATC assessment procedures. GAFATC clients are given the option to decline to have the personal information provided by them used for research purposes. Other data (e.g., Departmental data) are not subject to this restriction.

Measures

Demographic, offence-history and child protection history data were either supplied by the Department of Families or recorded routinely during assessment.

Psychometric measures were the Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 1991), the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (Shelton, Frick, & Wootton, 1996) and the Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol (J-SOAP) (Prentky, Harris, Frizzell, & Righthand, 2000).

Results

Demographic variables

The majority of participants (78%) were from an Anglo-Australian ethnic background, while the remainder (22%) were from an Indigenous-Australian background. The mean age at the time of the index offence was 14.69 years (SD = 1.76, Range: 12-16 years). There were no significant differences between the sibling and non-sibling groups on these variables.

Almost half of the sibling-incest offenders (46%) had a child protection history, compared with approximately one third of the nonsibling offenders (32%). More sibling offenders were also reported to have been victims of child sexual assault (38%) than nonsibling offenders (16%). A significantly higher number of sibling offenders (54% vs. 16%) also had a history of conduct problems ($\chi^2 = 5.20$, $p < .05$).

Offence variables

Sibling-incest offenders had been charged with a higher mean number of sexual offences (4.67 vs. 2.11, $t = 2.73$, $p = .01$).

Although the two groups had a similar mean number of victims (sibling-incest $M = 1.23$, $SD = .62$ vs. nonsiblings $M = 1.05$, $SD = .93$), sibling-incest offenders were more likely to have two or more victims (54%) than nonsibling offenders (11%), ($\chi^2 = 7.17$, $p < .01$).

Psychometric variables

Psychometric data from the Youth Self-Report were only available for 20 subjects. Of these, 50% ($n = 10$) were sibling-incest offenders and 50% ($n = 10$) were nonsibling offenders.

Means and standard deviations for the subscales of the Youth Self Report are displayed in Table 1. In terms of overall social competencies and problem behaviours, there were no significant differences between the two groups.

Table 1: Mean Youth Self-Report Scores

Measure	Sibling-Incest Offenders $n = 10$		Nonsibling offenders $n = 10$	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Youth Self-Report				
Withdrawn	3.8	2.7	4.3	2.2
Somatic	2.9	3.3	2.4	2.3
Anxious/Depressed	6.5	5.0	9.2	5.4
Social Problems	4.3	2.9	4.2	2.6
Thought Problems	3.8	2.8	3.5	2.9
Attention Problems	7.6	3.9	6.9	3.6
Delinquent Behaviour	6.9	2.8	6.8	4.9
Aggressive Behaviour	13.3	8.1	9.3	6.1
Internalising Problems Total	53.1	12.2	56.4	10.4
Externalising Problems Total	60.6	11.4	55.2	13.2
Total Problems	58.4	13.2	58.5	12.1

Scores on the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire are presented in Table 2. Psychometric data from the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire were only available for 19 subjects

Table 2: Mean Alabama Parenting Questionnaire Scores

Measure	Sibling-Offenders N = 10		Nonsibling offenders n = 9	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Alabama Parenting Questionnaire				
Parental Involvement	49.6	18.5	48.1	15.9
Parental Monitoring	29.0	8.8	25.0	6.4
Positive Parenting [*]	21.4	4.8	16.8	4.4
Inconsistent Discipline	17.3	4.9	13.8	2.4
Corporal Punishment	7.7	7.1	4.8	2.0

^{*}
p < .05

Overall, both groups reported very similar levels of parental involvement and parental monitoring. Sibling-incest offenders also reported significantly higher levels of positive parenting practices than nonsibling offenders ($t = 2.18$, $p < .05$), but levels of inconsistent discipline and corporal punishment just failed to reach significance ($t = 1.95$, $p = .068$).

Data from the Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol were available for all participants, and are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol (J-SOAP) Scores

Measure	Sibling-Offenders n = 13		Nonsibling offenders n = 19	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
J-SOAP				
Sexual Drive/Preoccupation [*]	2.7	1.4	1.3	1.9
Anti-social/Impulsive Behavior	9.9	6.3	6.3	6.0
Static Risk Scale [*]	13.1	6.6	7.6	6.5
Intervention/Treatment	5.0	2.3	5.3	2.3
Total Score [*] (scaled scores)	0.45	0.20	0.29	0.16

^{*}
p < .05

Sibling-incest offenders scored significantly higher than nonsibling offenders on the Sexual Drive/Preoccupation Scale ($t = 2.27$, $p < .05$), Static Risk Factor Scale ($t = 2.31$, $p < .05$), and Total Risk Factor Scale ($t = 2.36$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

This study revealed some significant differences between adolescent sibling incest offenders and non-sibling offenders against children, and suggests some trends that warrant further exploration. Some of the findings are consistent with previous reported research, whilst others represent newly reported findings.

In comparison to adolescents who sexually offended against nonsibling children, adolescent sibling-incest offenders against children had a significantly higher mean number of sexual offence charges, and were significantly more likely to have had multiple victims. A further trend suggesting that sibling offenders were more likely to be multiple offenders was also identified, however this difference did not reach significance. More sibling offenders were also reported to be victims of child sexual assault and were significantly more likely to have a history of conduct problems. These results are consistent with previous studies that have shown that, compared to nonsibling offenders, sibling-incest offenders had a higher mean number of sexual offences, were more likely to be multiple offenders and had a higher number of reported behavioural problems including conduct disorder (O'Brien, 1991). However, methodological issues, including uninterpreted high levels of within group variance and the limited statistical testing for between group differences, raise some questions about the reported findings in O'Brien's study.

Individual psychological characteristics of the two groups, as measured by the Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 1991), were not found to be different. This was consistent with Worling's (1995) study which found similarities between the two groups in relation to individual functioning.

Previous research examining the family environments of child sex offenders (Worling, 1995) has shown that, compared to nonsibling offenders, sibling-incest offenders were more likely to report higher levels of marital discord, more physical punishment, more negative family atmosphere and higher levels of parental rejection. Worling concludes that family environment factors not only distinguish between these two groups, but further indicate some differences in etiological pathways. In the present study sibling-incest offenders reported similar levels of parental involvement to nonsibling offenders, significantly higher levels of positive parenting practices, with a further trend towards higher levels of inconsistent discipline and corporal punishment. It is difficult to interpret such results given the potentially conflicting nature of these reports. Furthermore, the small sample size in this study makes it impossible to comment definitively on the ways in which the family environments may have influenced the offending pathways followed by participants in this study.

The sibling-incest offenders in this study were assessed as having more risk factors for sexual offence recidivism, and were thus assessed as being at significantly higher risk of recidivism, than nonsibling offenders. This assessment was based on the J-SOAP (Prentky et al., 2000) - an empirically-based risk assessment tool. In a recent study on adolescent sexual offence recidivism using a different offender sample (Nisbet & Wilson, under review), sibling-incest offenders (43%) were more likely than the total sample (25%) to recidivate as juveniles. The overall rate for adult sexual recidivism in this earlier study was 4.5%, compared to 7% for the sibling-incest offenders. The accuracy of the risk prediction with respect to the participants in the present study remains to be seen.

Taken together, the results of this study confirm the serious nature of child sexual assault perpetrated by adolescent siblings who are referred to GAFATC. As GAFATC only accepts referrals from the courts, it could be argued that referrals to this centre are more likely to represent those whose behaviour has been seen as particularly serious and in need of intervention. Other research incorporating both adjudicated and non-adjudicated sibling-incest offenders, however, has made very similar observations about the nature of adolescent sibling-incest offenders and offending (O'Brien, 1991). The majority of the sibling-incest subjects in the O'Brien (1991) study had not been referred through the courts, as opposed to 75% of the court-referred comparison group.

Despite the preliminary nature of these research findings, implications for professional intervention warrant consideration. In relation to reported trends that sibling offenders are less likely to be charged for their offences, it is noted that these findings reveal no evidence based justification for

this group to be responded to more leniently by the justice system. Moreover, in practical terms, this group may be disadvantaged by such a response, as they may find it difficult to access a specialist service outside the criminal justice system.

The finding that sibling offenders were assessed as a significantly higher risk of reoffending using the J-SOAP should also inform both statutory responses and treatment planning. The potentially increased risk associated with sibling offending has direct bearing on statutory intervention, especially with respect to decision making about contact between the perpetrating and victimised siblings. Access and opportunity represent two important situational risk factors, which will also undoubtedly have a bearing on actual risk. With respect to treatment planning, evidence of an increased level of risk may be associated with a longer period in treatment and suggests a need for higher resource allocation to these clients.

Whilst the findings of the current study are inconclusive in relation to family environment factors, previous research findings strongly suggest that parental and family environment factors are linked to sibling offending. This highlights the importance of parental involvement in treatment for these clients. This is further indicated by findings from previous studies of the victims of sibling incest which reveal increased levels of parental denial and minimisation in families where sibling incest has occurred.

However, in considering the implications of this research, the limitations of this study must be noted. Firstly, these findings represent preliminary data only, with the current data part of a larger planned research project. Additionally, the sample sizes are small, limiting generalisability of results. Moreover the sample is not fully representative given it only involves adjudicated youth. Clearly, further research incorporating comparison groups and larger sample sizes would be of great benefit in increasing our understanding of this phenomenon.

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